

The blessings of ageing

The impression we often get from the media is that older people are a burden on society. Parishes can highlight how their wisdom, experience and prayers can help us all to appreciate the gift of life

RACHEL WALKER

MORE PEOPLE in Britain are living into old age than ever before. In 1917, the average life expectancy was 50 for a woman and 45 for a man; fewer than 200 people were aged 100 or more. Now, the average life expectancy is 89 for women and 87 for men; and there are 15,000 people aged over 100.

Some say the fact that we are living longer is both the greatest triumph – and the greatest challenge – of the twenty-first century. We often read in newspapers and magazines that we cannot afford to support and care for all the people who are living later into life.

Such articles imply that older people are a problem and a burden. We have to ask whether they are just expressing the challenge of austerity or whether they are pointing to something deeper. Our world glorifies the preservation of a youthful appearance over the face that accompanies old age. It places a greater value on the economic contribution that we make to society than on the innate dignity of human life. Does the media coverage expose deeper fears of decline, diminishment and death?

The Church can offer a message of encouragement to all of us to recognise and cherish the blessings of ageing, which, in turn, will help to overcome some of the challenges. Parishes can play a vital role in this by highlighting how older people can help us all to value the precious gift of life and prompt us to live that life fully.

Reports by the charities Grandparents Plus and Age UK have expressed further appreciation for grandparents who deliver an estimated £7.3bn of free childcare every year. In his talk to mark Grandparents' Day last year, Pope Francis recognised how many essential local jobs are done by older people who make themselves available in their parishes for truly valuable service. Some are dedicated to decorating the church, others are catechists or leaders of liturgy, and still others are witnesses to charity.

Growing Old Grace-fully is a small charity working across the Diocese of Leeds, focused on supporting later-life-friendly parishes. It recently produced a guide called *Welcoming Older People: Ideas for and from Parishes*, which suggests a range of small and simple activities (as well as more ambitious projects) that parishes can undertake to value and support older people.

To do

RECOGNISE and cherish the blessings of ageing and offer older people a message of encouragement.

BE AWARE of the needs of people with dementia and make their pastoral and spiritual care a priority.

TACKLE LONELINESS with "little places of belonging" to help frail older people continue to have a sense of meaning in their lives.

For instance, St Patrick's Parish in Elland, West Yorkshire, has a Prayer Sponsor programme where a number of older people and housebound congregants support others in the parish. They say they love the feeling of doing something special to help someone else, and feel a connection with them, even though they may never meet.

Approximately 850,000 people live with dementia in the UK and 700,000 friends and family members care for them, according to Alzheimer's Research UK (2015 figures). The charity says that over 24 million people know a family member or friend who is living with dementia. Parishes can play a huge role in helping those people with dementia with whom they come into contact.

Parishes need to be aware of the needs of those in their communities who are experiencing difficulties. Care for people suffering from dementia in later life only becomes a proper priority of the Church's pastoral and spiritual work if those people with dementia and their carers are included in all aspects of parish life. Parish communities can become more inclusive by increasing their understanding of what it's like to live with dementia.

The Alzheimer's Society offers a one-day training session for anyone willing to become a dementia champion. They then can be the "go to" person for advice in their parish. The society also runs friends' sessions. St John Mary Vianney Parish in Leeds has a monthly weekday Mass for those living with memory loss and their carers. It is a relaxed service where everyone can come and worship together; helpers come from the church's Women's Group, the SVP and the junior SVP group. Local charities help to promote the Mass and the parish has also developed links with a local nursing home, which has enabled

three of the residents to attend church together with an activity worker.

Another challenge older people experience more often than most is the deaths of those close to them. In fact, older people can experience loss in many ways. On retiring from a job, they may lose some of their purpose in life and the status and routine of doing a paid job. A life-changing illness, loss of independence, with less mobility and moving house, are further challenges that they may face. As a church, we are very good at responding in a crisis – but what do we do for the bereaved once the initial shock has passed?

St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Parish in Shipley has set up a monthly coffee morning self-support group for those who have been bereaved. This ministry provides an opportunity to help the healing process by being with others who have had similar experiences.

One of the biggest challenges facing older people in Britain today is loneliness. A Church of England and Church Urban Fund investigation in 2014 showed that loneliness and social isolation are the most common concerns among church leaders; 64 per cent of the clergy considered loneliness a significant problem. According to the Campaign to End Loneliness, the type of isolation that is growing today isn't of the kind that passes quickly: it persists and wears people down. Research shows that loneliness is as bad for our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It increases the chances of developing dementia by 64 per cent.

One way to tackle loneliness is to offer "little places of belonging". Coffee mornings – or friendship groups – is one way of achieving this. Some parishes encourage those in later life to become involved in church groups that already exist. This can involve going along with someone to an event, or offering them a lift. The Justice and Peace group, the St Vincent de Paul group, Cafod or the Legion of Mary might consider encouraging new members to join.

These ideas can go far to ensure that even the frailest older people continue to have a sense of meaning in their lives – and that their gifts, wisdom, experience and prayers help us all to appreciate God's gift of life.

Rachel Walker is project coordinator for Growing Old Grace-fully in the Diocese of Leeds (www.growingoldgracefully.org.uk)